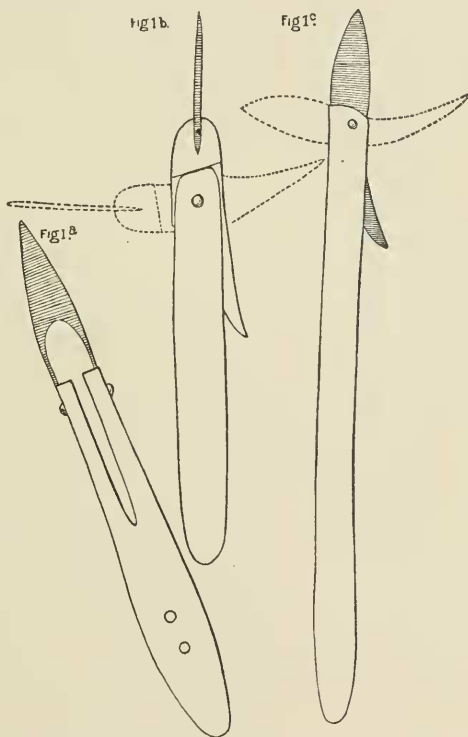


A REMARKABLE ESKIMO HARPOON FROM EAST GREENLAND.

BY JOHN MURDOCH.

Through the kindness of Dr. H. Rink, of Christiania, the well-known writer on Eskimo ethnology, I have lately received an accurate sketch made by himself of some remarkable harpoons used by the East Greenlanders, and brought home by the Danish expedition of 1884-'85. A brief description of this peculiar weapon in Dr. Rink's paper on the East Greenlanders (*Deutsche Geographische Blätter*, IX, 3, p. 233) first called my attention to the subject, and a letter to the author received the usual prompt and courteous attention that Dr. Rink always gives to such applications.



The remarkable thing about the harpoon (Fig. 1)* is that it is an almost exact copy in bone and iron, of the ordinary "toggle-iron" used by civilized whalers, chiefly, if not exclusively, by Americans. Fig.

* Fig. 1. Harpoons from East Greenland, sketched by Dr. Rink. *a* Front view and *b* side view of one harpoon; *c* side view of another. The dotted lines show the position of the head when "toggled."

2 is drawn from a specimen of the latter in the National Museum.

It will be seen that the only difference in plan of construction between the two weapons is that in the Greenland harpoon the head fits into a cleft in the tip of the shank, where it is secured by a pivot, while in the civilized "iron" it is the shank which fits into a groove in the head. The resemblance is at all events so close that there can be very little doubt that the East Greenland weapon is intended for a copy of the civilized one. The model was probably obtained, as Dr. Rink suggests, from a harpoon found in some wreck, or

what is perhaps more likely, cut from the carcass of a whale. It is well known that whales have carried harpoons for a great distance from

where they were struck, even, it is said, from Davis Strait to the Arctic north of Bering Strait. It is a strange fact that of all the Eskimo race, most of whom have been long in contact with civilized whalers, the isolated East Greenlanders, who could have come across the toggle-iron only by accident, should alone have adopted it as a model. The reason the Eskimos elsewhere, however, have not adopted the pivoted toggle harpoon is probably because they are satisfied with their own peculiar type of the weapon. This type is nearly universal among the Eskimos (see Fig. 3 for a sufficiently typical representation), and has the head entirely separated from the shaft, but so slung in a loop at the end of the line that when plunged into an animal it becomes detached from the shaft and "toggles" at right angles to the line, which thus performs the functions of the shank in the other two patterns. The Eskimos, generally, are probably right in adhering to this old pattern which, with its stout line of raw-hide, is probably stronger than the East Greenland harpoon with its slender pivot and comparatively weak shank of bone, which lacks the toughness and

flexibility of the high grade of wrought iron used for the equally slender shank of the civilized harpoon.

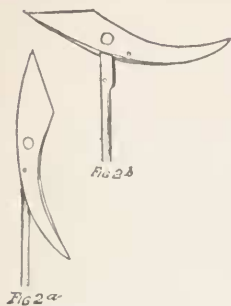


Fig. 2a

Fig. 2b

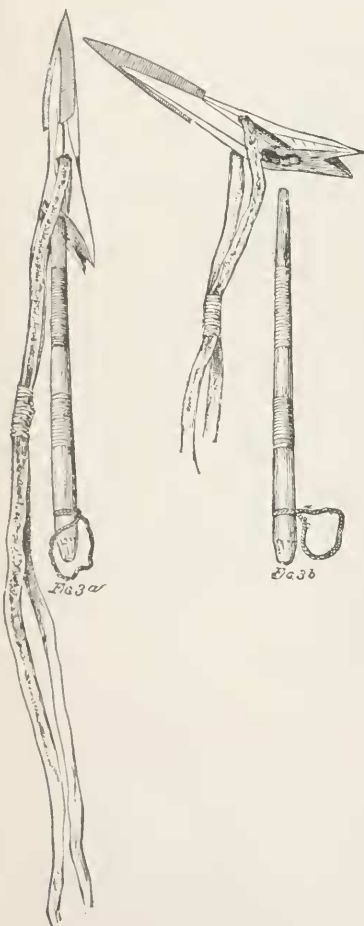


Fig. 3a

Fig. 3b

The East Greenlanders have, however, done a curious thing in copying the civilized harpoon. It is generally stated, and in all probability is true, though I have not been able to learn who first adopted the idea, that the modern American "toggle-iron" was suggested by the usual Eskimo weapon, much as the "Rob Roy" canoe, with its double-bladed paddle, is a civilized modification of the kayak. Thus we have an invention originating among savages, adopted and modified by civilized men, and then taken back with its modifications by savages of the same race as the inventors, who could have had no possible knowledge that it was the old harpoon of their fathers coming back to them in this strange shape.

It is not stated how generally this peculiar pattern of harpoon is used by the East Greenlanders. In view of what I have said of the probable weakness of this type, as compared with the usual Eskimo harpoon or civilized "iron," I should not be surprised to learn that the specimens brought back by Captain Holm were rather unusual even in East Greenland, and had been made as experiments by some particularly enterprising and ingenious native.

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